



Report Information from ProQuest

May 15 2013 15:06

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Partners in Success

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Publication info: School Library Journal 59. 1 (Jan 2013): n/a.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: Last spring, when school librarian Leslie Yoder heard that young adult author Francisco X. Stork was available to visit Boys Totem Town, a residential program for incarcerated teens in St. Paul, MN, she pounced on the opportunity. Although Yoder lacked the necessary funds, she instantly knew who to turn to--her partners at Ramsey County Library. Thanks to Ramsey teen librarian Marcus Lowry, the acclaimed writer spoke at a local high school and to dozens of Yoder's enthusiastic students. Yoder, Lowry, and Boese are among a small group of school and public librarians nationwide who regularly work together.

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Full text: Partners in Success When school and public librarians join forces, kids win Last spring, when school librarian Leslie Yoder heard that young adult author Francisco X. Stork was available to visit Boys Totem Town, a residential program for incarcerated teens in St. Paul, MN, she pounced on the opportunity. Although Yoder lacked the necessary funds, she instantly knew who to turn to--her partners at Ramsey County Library. For the last two years, Yoder, a digital literacy and learning specialist with St. Paul's public schools, has teamed up with Ramsey's teen librarians--and the outcome has been a win-win for both the librarians and the kids whom they serve. Thanks to Ramsey teen librarian Marcus Lowry, who found the funds for Stork's visit, the acclaimed writer spoke at a local high school and to dozens of Yoder's enthusiastic students about his novel Behind the Eyes (Dutton, 2006), which deals with a reform school. "Our students don't get to meet the people who write the books," says Yoder. When Lowry and fellow young adult librarian Amy Boese visit Boys Totem Town, they are weighed down with bags of books and eager to do what they do best--booktalking and spearheading a weeklong technology workshop. "It's really energizing for us to go there," says Boese, who also works with three other school districts. "They are always superpolite and have good questions." Although the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the American Library Association's (ALA) Public Library Data Service Statistical Report don't keep track of the number of joint-library projects, Yoder, Lowry, and Boese are among a small group of school and public librarians nationwide who regularly work together. Like many rewarding collaborative projects, theirs usually begin with a modest idea, in this case, offering booktalks to kids in a correctional facility. But behind every successful school and public library partnership, explains Lowry, there's also a strong personal connection and a shared vision. "It almost always has to start with one personal connection," he says. "It's the one person that sees that mutual value--that we serve the same kids." It's also sound fiscal sense for school and public libraries to pool their limited resources, says Jeffrey Roth, the New York Public Library's vice president of strategy and finance. "We're in an era that institutions need to look and see who they can partner with and strategically use each other's assets," he says. That's a strategy that the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and Nashville Public Library (NPL) have worked to perfection. Although sharing public library collections with public schools is fairly unusual, that didn't stop these two creative partners from thinking outside the box. During the 2011-2012 academic year, when Nashville's budget-strapped schools were hurting for resources, the public library reached out a helping hand and loaned the city's 54 middle schools and high schools 97,000 items--everything from books and DVDs to CDs and Playaways to entice reluctant readers and struggling English-language learners. As a result of the impressive partnership, which is called Limitless Libraries, Stephanie Ham, NPL's project coordinator, says the public library's circulation stats have soared by an unprecedented 60 percent. And on the school side, MNPS's lead librarian, Kathleen Bennett,

couldn't be more pleased. "This model is just fantastic and the benefits are great," says Bennett. "What the kids get is wonderful open access to lots of resources." (For more on Nashville's Limitless Libraries, visit SLJ's online features at www.slj.com.) The relationship between schools and public librarians is a critical one. Even before the recent recession, few school libraries could match the buying power of a large branch or a mid-size public library system. And during these troubled economic times, school librarians and their budgets are often among the first items scratched from public school budgets. That's a compelling reason why Wisconsin's School District of La Crosse and the La Crosse Public Library are exploring the possibility of sharing school and public library databases. "From a fiscal perspective, we're starting to balance our resources so we are not duplicating online services," says Vicki Lyons, the district's director of technology and library services. Still, successful school and public library partnerships can be a tough act to pull off, say many librarians and educators. Some of the typical roadblocks include a lack of time, vision, or resources; difficult personalities to deal with; and a scarcity of support from higher-ups. That may explain why less than one-third of school and public libraries coordinate book and other material purchases, according to School Library Journal's first public library spending survey (see "It Takes Two," May 2012, ow.ly/gekWY). When it comes to homework assignments, only nine percent of public libraries work directly with schools. The emphasis on standardized testing can also be a barrier to working together, especially when kids are pulled out of the classroom to visit a public library. If the benefits of a joint effort aren't obvious, says Rachelle Nocito, a content specialist for the School District of Philadelphia, many teachers and principals begin to worry that these activities will negatively impact test scores. "School districts are judged on our students' achievement," explains Nocito, whose district is piloting a program with the Free Library of Philadelphia. "It's really important that when we step out of our building to do anything, its purpose definitely aligns with the reading program and social studies curriculum or science curriculum." But that doesn't mean that school and public libraries should hesitate to work together. Susan Ballard, president of the American Association of School Librarians, a division of ALA, encourages school and public librarians to reach out to one another and other community groups. "No one can do anything on their own anymore; it's simply not possible," Ballard says. At the moment, ALA's Interdivisional Committee on School/Public Library Cooperation is working on ways to bring media centers and public libraries together on issues such as preventing "summer slide"--when kids lose many of the reading gains made during the school year--and implementing the Common Core standards. "If you're not collaborating, why aren't you collaborating?" Ballard asks. "The end result improves services for kids and makes them better researchers and lifelong learners." Students, of course, aren't the only ones who benefit from a collaborative program. "Great partnerships let you reach out dynamically and work with a wide variety of partners within the school and public library," says Marge Loch-Wouters, coordinator of youth services at La Crosse Public Library. She should know. Loch-Wouters has been building partnerships with local Wisconsin schools for more than two decades. "Great partnerships don't put you in a box," she says. Buffy Hamilton doesn't need to be convinced that joint-library ventures make a world of difference. Hamilton is so bullish on them that she recently left her post at Creekview High School, in Canton, GA, where she ran an award-winning library program, and joined the Cleveland Public Library's (CPL) staff. School and public libraries "have much more in common with their visions and goals than we might initially think," says Hamilton, who will be CPL's liaison with Cleveland's public schools. "We're working on these parallel paths, and we can find a way to interact and pool our collective resources and talents to accomplish those goals." The following collaborative projects are a sampling of what's happening around the country. Each of these dynamic programs has its own distinct approach, but they all have one thing in common: they're making a genuine difference in kids' lives and in the communities that they serve. Denver, CO In 2006, when residents of the Mile High City voted to raise the sales tax to support full-day kindergarten and early childhood education, the Denver Public Library (DPL) and the Denver Public Schools (DPS) knew it was the perfect time to extend their partnership, which, at the time, primarily placed library volunteers in the classroom to read to kids. With the help of a two-year, \$476,000 Library Services and Technology Act grant, the two organizations

banded together, in 2007, to teach children's librarians, media specialists, and teachers about the latest advances in early childhood education. Children's librarians who specialized in infant and toddler brain development shared their knowledge with teachers, and educators, in turn, brought public librarians up-to-date on the workings of the adolescent brain. "It was a new way to collaborate," says David Sanger, DPS's director of library services. "We formed professional learning communities, and those have still continued." Although the grant ended in 2009, the partnership is still going strong. These days DPL, DPS, and local nonprofit groups and agencies, such as Head Start, are working together on a number of projects for children from poor families. School and public librarians are also sharing their respective approaches to improving literacy and serving the city's many English-language learners, who make up 34 percent of Denver's K-12 students. Both groups are also discussing how best to share their resources, including, says Sanger, how to get their catalog databases to "talk to each other." Their efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Denver's 5 By 5 Project, which was created to support early childhood development, was inspired by these school and library partnerships, says Carol Edwards, DPL's comanager of children's and family services. The nonprofit organization, whose goal is to make sure that young kids have at least five cultural experiences by the time they start kindergarten, provides free admission to the city's top cultural venues, such as the Denver Botanical Gardens and the Colorado Ballet, to nearly 3,000 Head Start and Early Head Start families. Plus, the library also offers free after-school camps for children of families in need. "It's something that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been talking to each other," says Edwards. This month, DPL joined communities, such as Louisville and Boston, where one card serves as a student's ID and library card. MyDenver Card will also give kids free access to city parks and recreation services, and there are plans to expand its benefits to include the city's transit system, says Jennifer Hoffman, manager of DPL's books and borrowing. Hoffman says she anticipates issuing 30,000 cards. "We're just trying to make it easy for a student to access us," she says.

Portland, OR To reach out to parents and students in east Portland, Multnomah County Library's (MCL) Midland branch staff worked with educators at the Fir Ridge Campus (FRC), the David Douglas School District's alternative high school. Their mission? To find teens who were eager to become library tour guides. But these tours aren't your average orientation sessions--especially when they're conducted in Russian, Vietnamese, and Mandarin, the languages spoken in many of the young volunteers' homes and neighborhoods. The aim of this innovative school-library project, says FRC's librarian Deb Wheelbarger, is to attract parents who live in east Portland's diverse and poor neighborhoods to bring their kids to the library and introduce them to its resources. Student-guided tours are just one way that MCL has teamed up with its five area school districts. Another outreach program, Multnomah's School Corps (staffed by Jackie Partch, Kate Houston, Peter Ford, and Gesse Stark, all of whom have MLIS degrees), offers local teachers curriculum support, which includes issuing them special library cards (so they can check out more books for longer periods of time), school visits to talk about research skills and library services, and "Buckets of Books," which, as its name suggests, come brimming with books on commonly taught subjects, such as Oregon history, Pacific Northwest Native Americans, and insects and spiders, says Suzanne Myers Harold, MCL's adult literacy coordinator. The library also brings visiting authors to local schools and works hard to bring students from the county's high-poverty areas to theater productions and special events, including an awe-inspiring visit with the Portland Trailblazers, the city's National Basketball Association team. "Through this collaboration with Multnomah County Library, we're able to speak for them, and they for us," says Wheelbarger. "I love the Multnomah County Library. It's one of the most accessible libraries in the country."

New York, NY When the New York City Department of Education (NYDOE) realized there was a great way to work together with the New York Public Library (NYPL), Queens Library, and Brooklyn Public Library to get more learning resources into teachers' and students' hands, it couldn't wait to get started--and MyLibraryNYC was soon launched. Funded by a \$5 million grant from Citigroup, the four-year pilot program, which gives students and teachers access to literally millions of additional materials, lets kids search their school and public libraries' catalogs simultaneously from any computer that has Internet access. From the very start, the program, which began in 2011 with 84

schools and 50 NYPL branches, opted to take a potentially risky tact: to encourage kids to take advantage of their libraries, students would not be fined if they failed to return materials on time. A recipe for disaster? Not at all, says NYPL's Roth. In fact, almost 100 percent of the borrowed items have found their way back onto the library's shelves. Best of all, students are scooping up more books. "The kids in the pilot were three times more likely to have a book checked out from their local library, and school library circulation essentially doubled," says Roth. "The New York Public Library and the Department of Education already had a great relationship, but this has taken it to another level." Now in its second year, MyLibraryNYC reaches 250,000 students in 400 public schools, offering them access to 17 million books, videos, and recordings. And by 2015, the program hopes to include all 1.1 million of the city's public school students, says Richard Hasenyager, NYDOE's director of library services. As part of the pilot program, NYPL will deliver books and other materials that meet the Common Core State Standards to participating schools. Groundwork is also being laid in all three public library systems to work more closely with school librarians and curriculum specialists so that their collections will support the state's Common Core State Standards. NYPL estimates that MyLibraryNYC will cost \$6 per student annually in direct and indirect costs, which include shipping the materials to schools and library branches. The public library systems pay for shipping and staff training, and the every school pays the roughly \$800 annual fee charged by library resource vendor Follett for its Destiny catalog and BiblioCommons, which developed the catalog's software and online interface. (Follett is giving those school libraries a \$150 discount on Destiny.) School libraries that haven't joined the pilot will pay \$650, says Leanne Ellis, NYDOE's coordinator of library services. This year, the pilot added the Queens and Brooklyn public libraries and expanded to 207 school libraries that now serve 296 schools, says NYDOE. Although schools have to foot part of the bill, when you stop to consider what kids are getting in return--access to "the greatest books ever written by man," says NYPL's Roth--it's a real deal. Queens Library sees MyLibraryNYC as a launching pad to expand its librarians' ongoing work with schools in the borough. "What can be done to help the kids, to support the teachers, to ensure kids have a strong start in reading and literacy and a place to go and their parents, too?" asks Bridget Quinn-Carey, the library's chief operating officer. "Those are the wonderful things that libraries can do." Monterey, CA To help its incoming freshman beef up their critical thinking skills and boost their tech know-how, the Monterey High School (MHS) turned to a familiar partner, the Monterey Public Library. The two teamed up to create a class called 21st Century Learning Skills. Aaron Sanders, the MHS history teacher who helped kick-start it, and Ben Gomberg, a librarian formerly with the Monterey Public Library, worked together to create the course's project-oriented assignments, which have included creating websites that explore the coastal town's history and comparing employment information that kids found on Craigslist with data provided by the U.S. Department of Labor. Supported by a \$5,300 IMLS grant, their aim was to give 130 to 150 freshmen (out of a class of 1,100) the skills they needed to succeed in school and in life, says Sanders. As part of the class, students made four separate visits to the public library (located just a block away), and Gomberg, in turn, made the same number of classroom visits, offering presentations on topics such as copyright and privacy, evaluating websites, and using library resources to prepare for college and careers. How's the new course working out? According to MHS's principal, Marcie Plummer, students who took the class had fewer D's and F's, absences, and discipline issues than their nonparticipating peers. Roughly half of the kids in the class reported using the public library in their free time and about a third of them also used it to do schoolwork from other classes, says Gomberg. Students in the pilot program have also learned how to be advocates for their own learning and how to evaluate their approaches to school so that they can improve their academic performance. "Personally as a teacher, I saw them having huge gains in that area," Sanders says. "They were not afraid of having conversations with their teachers." Philadelphia, PA How do you improve 146,090 kids' information literacy and critical thinking skills? If you're the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) and the Free Library of Philadelphia, you join hands to create a dynamic pilot program that pairs third-grade teachers with children's librarians from nearby branches. How does the program work? Six times during the last two months of the school year, instead of taking part in their

school's daily requirement of 90 minutes of reading, about 200 third graders take a short walk to their local public library, usually no more than a couple of blocks away. The purpose of the visits? To research the history of Philadelphia and their neighborhoods. Upon returning to their classrooms, groups of three or four students dive headlong into the resources they discovered at the library and begin to create their own projects, says district content specialist Nocito. Although it's impossible to predict what these inspired students are likely to cook up, one thing's for sure--it's always interesting. Sarah Stippich, a children's librarian at the Blanche A. Nixon/Cobbs Creek Library, remembers the day when the Free Library's 25-foot-long, state-of-the art Techmobile visited Anderson Elementary School and its third graders were introduced to iPads. "They were digitally mapping our neighborhood," says Stippich. "They were really into that, not only the technology part of that, but being able to look at their neighborhood and say, 'Oh, that's where I live.'" Some classes combine their walks to the library with physical education, and their students strap on pedometers to count their footsteps, says Betsy Orsburn, the Free Library's chief of the Office of Public Service Support. Although it will take at least three years to gather enough data to evaluate the pilot, says Nocito, the initial assessments indicate that students are making connections between their schoolwork and library resources. Their teachers also reported developing moderately strong to strong informative partnerships with public librarians. Nocito would like to improve on the instructional aspects of the pilot program. Ideally, she'd like to see a 10-week local history project that touches on different curriculum areas, such as science and language arts, and then follow up with an assessment to see if students' gains continue on in fourth grade. "We're under scrutiny," she says. "Our students are going to be held accountable for their visits to the Free Library." The pilot program originally began in 2011, when the Free Library offered to help city schools that didn't have a librarian or a school library, says Joe Benford, the Free Library's chief of the Extensions Division. "It really is a way to try to cement library instruction and information literacy in the school district curriculum," says Benford. Although more than 100 of Philadelphia's 249 public schools have school libraries, only 46 schools have certified librarians. "The school librarians are almost nonexistent," says Benford. "What we're trying to do is prove this works and works as a model for the future. We just wanted to see if we could collaborate with the school district, and we have." Even though the pilot program appears to be working, there are limits to what it can accomplish. Stippich, who works with three third-grade teachers at Anderson Elementary School and with seven other schools and 12 child-care centers, says it's impossible for her to offer everyone the level of service that she gives to those in the pilot program. "I can't be the librarian for everyone," she says. "This has just convinced me even more that they need more school librarians." AuthorAffiliation Freelance writer Marta Murvosh is an aspiring librarian who often writes about libraries and education. You can find her at www.facebook.com/MartaMurvosh.

Subject: Public schools; Libraries; Alliances; Market strategy

Location: United States--US

Classification: 9190: United States; 8306: Schools and educational services; 7000: Marketing; 8305: Professional services not elsewhere classified; 9550: Public sector

Publication title: School Library Journal

Volume: 59

Issue: 1

Pages: n/a

Publication year: 2013

Publication date: Jan 2013

Year: 2013

Section: Features

Publisher: Media Source

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Publication subject: Publishing And Book Trade, Education, Library And Information Sciences

ISSN: 03628930

Source type: Trade Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: Feature

ProQuest document ID: 1266782314

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1266782314?accountid=44871>

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Last updated: 2013-04-30

Database: ProQuest Discovery, ProQuest Research Library

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